Professional Reading

By Cmdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Made famous in the 1954 movie The Bridges at Toko Ri, *the F9F Panther was the workhorse of Navy and Marine Corps fighter squadrons in Korea.*

Grumman F9F Panther/Cougar: First Grumman Cat of the Jet Age

Brad Elward. North Branch, Minn.: Specialty Press, 2010. 159 pp. $29.95.

The F9F series has received its share of coverage in books and magazines, but seldom in such detail as it gets in this book. Grumman was the leading supplier of naval fighters for the U.S. Navy during World War II (and a major supplier to Britain's Royal Navy), and also provided a large number of TBM Avenger torpedo bombers. Consequently, it was with great enthusiasm that the Long Island-based company tackled the new assignment of providing a jet-powered fighter, which eventually was designated the F9F Panther. The final design was a business-like, but not unattractive, aircraft that flew in an unpainted finish adorned only with national insignia.

Civilian test plot Corky Meyer took the new fighter for its first flight on 21 November 1947. There was little trouble with the testing and the Panther joined Navy and Marine Corps squadrons in time for the war in Korea in June 1950. Panthers flew the first strikes against the invading North Koreans from the carrier USS *Valley Forge* (CV 45) and the jet was the main carrier-based strike fighter for the next three years. It also equipped two Marine squadrons ashore.

In 1951, the Panther design was modified with the addition of swept wings, and the resulting aircraft was designated the F9F-6 Cougar (in 1961 it was re-designated F-9). For the next two decades, the Grumman "Cat" jets were a major presence on nearly every U.S. carrier flight deck, flying in both the fighter and the light attack role. Eventually replaced by the next generation (namely Vought's F-8 Crusader and McDonnell's F-4 Phantom II), the F9Fs/F-9s flew out their last years as advanced trainers in several Navy Texas-based squadrons, and also served as developmental platforms for new armament systems, such as the AIM-9 Sidewinder.

I wish the author had given more coverage to the Cougar's final role—indeed, the only one in which it saw combat in U.S. colors—as a fast forward air control aircraft with three Marine Corps headquarter and maintenance squadrons (H&MSs) in Vietnam during 1967. Elward briefly mentions this story, but there is a lot more to it than he indicates. He barely notes four TF-9Js flying with H&MS-11 and H&MS-13, but H&MS-12 participated as well.

Aside from these admittedly small concerns, this new book about the F9F series is well done and offers a nice assortment of photos and supportive text.

VF-11/111 "Sundowners": 1942-95

Barrett Tillman with Henk van der Lugt. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2010. 128 pp. $25.95.

A part of the publisher's Aviation Elite Units series, this book packs a lot of information in a relatively small space. Veteran historian Barrett Tillman combines his considerable talents with the official historian of VF-111, Henk van der Lugt from the Netherlands. The result is a highly readable account of the Sundowners in war and peace. Tillman also wrote an earlier monograph on VF-11 in 1993.

Established in early 1942, VF-11 quickly found itself in combat over Guadalcanal facing the best the Japanese had to offer. The campaign in the Solomon Islands produced the squadron's first aces, as well as what would become one of the most well-known squadron insignias of U.S. Naval Aviation: two aircraft silhouettes shooting down a huge red ball representing the sun over the Pacific. The squadrons followed the island-hopping path that would bring the full might of U.S. carrier aviation to Japan's doorstep.

Following the war and a brief period flying Grumman's last propeller "Cat," the powerful little F8F Bearcat, the squadron entered the jet age and never looked back. Deploying to Korea with F9F Panthers, it entered the history books in November 1950 when its commanding officer, Lt. Cmdr. William Amen, destroyed a MiG-15, a first for the Navy and, as it turned out years later, a world's first in jet-to-jet combat. (For years, the Air Force took credit for the first all-jet kill when an F-80 pilot claimed a MiG the day before Amen's kill. It was later discovered the Air Force's MiG actually made it home safely.) VF-11 eventually morphed into VF-111, and another squadron—the Red Rippers—took the designation of VF-11 (now VFA-111).

The squadron left the F9F series for North American's FJ-3 Fury, then Grumman's F11F Tiger, and finally, the redoubtable F-8 Crusader, which the squadron took on some of the first Vietnam combat cruises aboard several carriers. The early cruises were tough, and losses were heavy in people and planes. There were a few successes, though. In September 1968, a VF-111 Crusader pilot, Lt. Anthony Nargi, scored what was the last official F-8 kill over Vietnam.

Post-Vietnam descriptions include flying the upgraded F-4N and a transition to the F-14A in 1978. It looked like the squadron had a long future ahead of it. It was even assigned to CVW-15, aboard USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) and USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70), making several Westpac deployments. It was not to last, however, and budget cuts and force reductions resulted in the Sundowners making their last cruise in 1994 and returning home to be decommissioned in February 1995.

Although the squadron has seen its last sunset, its rich and glorious history is preserved in this fine book.

Hero of the Air: Glenn Curtiss and the Birth of Naval Aviation

William F. Trimble. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2010. 320 pp. $47.95.

One of a few scholarly works on one of the seminal figures in early American aviation, this new book by an established aviation historian (whose earlier works include a biography of Rear Adm. William A. Moffett) is a concentrated account of Glenn Curtiss' relatively short but busy life. This is an important book, particularly in light of this year's observances for the 100th anniversary of Naval Aviation.

In the first two decades of aviation following the 1903 flight by the Wright brothers, it seemed that pursuit of powered flight belonged to this secretive, somewhat odd pair from Dayton, Ohio. Indeed, because of their dedicated attempts to keep to themselves, there were many who refused to believe the brothers' claims concerning a number of patents to the technology they developed. Thus, many other early aviators maintained their own efforts, which only annoyed the Wrights and frustrated the brothers' attempts to maintain copyrights on their various inventions.

Even those who did believe the Wrights encountered resistance when they asked the brothers for help or information. One of these was Glenn Curtiss, a young motorcycle enthusiast from upstate New York. Conflict with the Dayton siblings was to characterize much of Curtiss' later life, but he persisted and is generally considered to have established aviation as a major part of the U.S. military—especially the Navy.

Having decided to concentrate his efforts on waterborne aircraft, Curtiss produced an admirable series of flying machines that helped get the Navy into the air. He also developed the flying boat, which early on allowed multi-engine designs to enter operations by World War I. Curtiss' first successful flying boat flew in 1912. The Wrights pursued an active legal course against Curtiss, whom they considered their chief rival. While Curtiss tried to focus on refining his designs, the brothers rebuffed his overtures to settle their conflict and work together.

This biography is somewhat difficult to read, with a cumbersome, stodgy style that does not help the reader get through the dates and numbers that drag down the narrative in the overlong chapters describing the very early years of powered flight and the growing contest between Curtiss and the Wrights brothers. Despite this criticism, *Hero of the Air* is an important book that enthusiasts and historians should read and add to their libraries.